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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000078

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/YERGER

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TAGS: PGOV PREL LE

SUBJECT: LEBANON: AL-AKHBAR JOURNALIST ON ELECTION

STALEMATE

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).).

SUMMARY

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¶1. (C) Political commentator Nicola Nassif, who writes for pro-Hizballah Al-Akhbar, believes Arab League SYG Amr Moussa's shuttle diplomacy in Beirut is a waste of time and that the presidential election impasse suits all parties. No one really wants Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander Michel Sleiman as president. Nassif also maintained that Syria is not at all worried by Saudi or other Arab states' threats not to attend the March 2008 Arab League summit in Damascus, but is focused on keeping its political influence in Lebanon. The Lebanese dilemma will not be resolved until Syrian-Saudi relations get back on track and Syria, through Saudi Arabia, improves its relations with the U.S.

¶2. (C) According to Nassif, there is no clear majority or minority opposition, and the "battle" between the two camps will be contained within political circles. He characterized March 14 as a group of personal interests that unite only under certain circumstances, and which since 2005 has lost most of its cohesiveness. End summary.

CABINET IS MAIN CONCERN, PRESIDENCY SECONDARY

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¶3. (C) On January 11, Poloff met with editorialist Nicola Nassif who writes for pro-Hizballah al-Akhbar newspaper. Nassif is convinced Arab League SYG Amr Moussa's shuttle diplomacy is a waste of time. Neither the majority nor the opposition wants a solution to the presidency crisis, he claimed; no one is interested in electing a president now, and certainly not in electing LAF Commander Sleiman because, Nassif says, Sleiman is no longer perceived as a guarantor of anyone's interests. Both March 14 and March 8 have decided it is far better to be one's own guarantor through gaining control of the future cabinet.

CENTRALITY OF SYRIAN-SAUDI RELATIONS

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¶4. (C) Nassif maintained that the Lebanese situation will not be solved unless Syrian-Saudi relations are mended, but threats by Saudi Arabia and other Arab states to boycott the Syria-hosted March 2008 Arab League summit will never sway Damascus. The summit is important for Syria, but not as important as maintaining political influence in Lebanon. As Nassif put it, the Arab League summit results will be ink on paper, but continuing Syrian influence in Lebanon brings

Syria real benefits. In Nassif's view, Lebanon is even more important to Syria than regaining the Golan Heights, which will only bring it "more unemployment." In any case, Syria is willing to dig in its heels and wait, infinite patience being one trait Asad junior learned from his father. Nassif pointed out that Syria left Lebanon rather meekly in 2005, and was far more isolated then than now, having gradually regained its political influence in Lebanon while realizing it will never again have a military presence on the ground.

¶ 15. (C) Syria wants the U.S. to acknowledge that Damascus has political influence, but it can only achieve that via Saudi Arabia. This is quite doable, since it is easy to make people feel positive about Syria, Nassif claimed. A case in point was when Syria provided information to the French and the Saudis about jihadis (French and Saudi nationals) heading for Iraq, during the inconclusive December 2007 French initiative talks which attempted to reconcile the majority and opposition positions on how to elect Sleiman. According to Nassif, there are only two ways of dealing with Syria: "You either strike her, or negotiate with her."

¶ 16. (C) While Nassif does not believe the political situation is progressing toward a solution, it also is not moving toward an "explosion." He added that that both opposition and majority are well aware that "whoever resorts to the streets" will be a loser. Nassif pointed out that in 1988, Lebanon was without a president for a year and 44 days. In any case, no solution is possible in Lebanon until outside circumstances "mature," at which point they will be implemented in Lebanon.

MARCH 14 UNITED ONLY BY CIRCUMSTANCE

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¶ 17. (C) Nassif called the pro-government March 14 coalition a group of personal interests that unite under certain circumstances. Certainly, March 14 at present is not the same March 14 that existed in 2005, after the assassination of Rafiq Hariri and the Cedar Revolution, and is disintegrating as the personal interests of its members gradually take precedence over maintaining a show of unity in the face of internal tensions.

¶ 18. (C) According to Nassif, supporting Sleiman as the March 14 candidate was a decision PM Siniora, Future Movement leader Saad Hariri, and Druse leader Walid Jumblatt made in a private November 21 meeting, without consulting their March 14 allies, thus provoking tension with the Christians in the bloc. (Comment: We believe this to be true. End comment.) Jumblatt is terrified of internecine Druse conflict (Nassif claimed that Jumblatt rival Wiam Wahab recently received \$60 million from Iran, purportedly for weapons) and has become ever more malleable regarding the presidential election. Others, such as Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea, only grudgingly accepted Sleiman, seeing in him a threat to their own political bases.

COMMENT

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¶ 19. (C) Nassif joined the staff of pro-Hizballah al-Akhbar in 2006 after 22 years with moderate, anti-Syrian al-Nahar newspaper, reportedly to get better pay and benefits. Despite that, he has a reputation for editorial independence and objectivity, and we find his reporting balanced in contrast with that of his al-Akhbar colleagues. His comments on how to deal with Syria do not come from an overly sympathetic view of the Syrian regime.

¶ 10. (C) Nassif's views echoed two themes we hear often: that the chances of Sleiman ever being elected are decreasing and that players outside Lebanon (including Syria, Saudi Arabia, and the U.S.) will have to come to terms before Lebanon's

dilemma can be resolved. End comment.

FELTMAN